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THE BAD-ENOUGH STATE

NONPOLITICS   BARBARISM, BIOPOLITIK POSTMODERNER KÖRPER, CAPITALISM, DEPE STATE, MARXISM, NEOLIBERALISM, POLICE, PRIVATIZATION, STATE

I was asked to consider the question of 'the withering away of the state'. Engels first coined the phrase, as you know, in his *Anti-Durhing*. Engels writes:

The interference of the state power in social relations becomes superfluous in one sphere after another, and then ceases of itself. The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things and the direction of the processes of production. The state is not 'abolished', it withers away.

At stake in this phrase was the long running dispute between Marx and his followers and the anarchists, especially Bakunin. To summarize brutally, Bakunin accused Marx of a 'Stateolatry', a desire to replace the existing state with a socialist state but no more, while Marx regarded the anarchists as naïve in their aim to 'immediately' abolish the state. The 'withering away' of the state would provide the answer, for Engels, in terms of sketching a transition. It is the problem and question of the transition from capitalism to socialism and/or communism that is at stake.[1]

Here, unusually, I don't want to focus on this past debate. I want to consider what 'the withering away of the state' might mean in the present moment. One obvious answer is that provided by neoliberal capitalism. The withering away of the state would no longer carry a communist or anarchist meaning, but instead refer to the withdrawal of the state from the public sphere in favour of the market. This 'withering' would be a rolling back of the state as we have seen the wiping out of state ownership and the introduction of the markets or pseudo-markets into forms of public provision, especially education and health. Today the withering away of the state, like so many communist or anarchist ideas or practices, would be recuperated by capitalism to its own purposes in what Paolo Virno calls 'the communism of capital'.[2]

There are a number of obvious rejoinders to such a claim. The first is that while the state might have withdrawn from some functions it has intensified its presence in others. This is most evident in policing. The 'withering' of the neoliberal state has involved an increased militarization of policing and the importation of violent neo-colonial techniques into the metropoles. The figure of the riot police officer as Robocop has become familiar in Europe. In the face of various uprisings and riots, the police have turned to military technology and weaponry. At the same time, of course, the military have justified their neo-colonial incursions in the language and form of policing, a strategy with a long history. The second rejoinder is that, as Foucault and many others have argued, neoliberalism is not a withering of the state but a new use or operation of the state to impose markets where none existed. Again, this has been evident in education and health, where the rolling back of public education and health has involved the proliferation of regulatory bodies ('quangos' in the UK jargon), new forms of measure, league tables, and an intensifying range of mechanisms to subjects these forms-of-life to the value form. While we often seem to be haunted by the imaginary of the social democratic state,[3] what we have is a new (or old) state form that operates to enforce the market and value upon us.

I want to suggest this contradiction between the state as withering and the state as intruding is one that is real and lived. It seems to me that our experience of the state is one that embodies these contradictory experiences of absence and intrusive presence. This is another way to address what Alessandro Russo has called the concern of contemporary thought with 'the peculiar materiality of the state'.[4] To take some examples I know, from the UK and from education, the state is absent in removing support for students, in leaving education to the market, in withdrawing a whole range of other services (public libraries, health care, various benefits) that supported the experience of the student. On the other hand, the state appears as intrusive in the imposition of a series of regulatory frameworks (REF for research, TEF for teaching), in the creation of new devices for ranking and assessment (the NSS), and in a series of policy initiatives that erode intellectual independence (Prevent, etc.). One thing to note is how the university itself, in the UK, comes to stand in for the state as well. Now student demands for resources and support are directed at the university. Therefore, in student protests, the demands are ones that not only call for the socialization of education (ending fees, creating an environment of intellectual support, etc.) but also for the provision of services the state no longer provides (primarily mental health services). Due to fees the universities as de facto privatized institutions and so these demands exist within an uneasy relation to money – 'I pay fees, I demand X'. In this way, the privatization of education and health is continued by stealth.

This dialectic of absence and intrusion can, of course, take forms that are more violent. The absence of health support, the withdrawal of benefits, the imposition of tests for claimants, the violent regulation of citizenship and borders, have all led directly to suicide, to death by illness, and to the quiet epidemics of anxiety that are so prevalent. In the case of intrusive presence, the violent appearance of the police and their militarization, as I've noted, become part of everyday life. The state appears as the security guard, in the figure of the armed police that now dominate airports and other sites of transit and wealth, while remaining absent from other social functions.[5] This is why, as The Invisible Committee note in *To Our Friends*, 'the epoch has even begun to secrete its own platitudes, like that All Cops Are Bastards (ACAB) which a strange internationale emblazons on the rough walls of cities, from Cairo to Istanbul, and Rome to Paris or Rio, with every thrust of revolt'.[6]

To grasp this situation I want to draw an analogy with the work of the British psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott. Gilles Deleuze argues:

[A] psychoanalyst like Winnicott works at the limits of psychoanalysis because he feels at a certain point this contractual procedure is no longer appropriate. There comes a time when translating fantasies, interpreting signifier or signified, is no longer to the point. There comes a moment that has to be shared: you must put yourself in the patient's situation, you must enter into it.[7]

To talk about this new situation we need to reconstruct Winnicott's notion of development, which I will do in a summary fashion. Winnicott argued that psychological health was dependent on the 'good-enough mother' (it would be better to say caregiver[8]). Winnicott argues that the primary caregiver has to create a holding environment. This is a space in which the child can experience their own fantasies of omnipotence and, slowly, be introduced to reality. The caregiver allows 'doses' of reality to enter so the child can successfully experience the world as something they live in, but can also change. One of the most important ways in which this is done is through the 'transitional object' – a

particularly valued toy or item (Winnie the Pooh, Linus's blanket in *Peanuts*, Hobbes in *Calvin and Hobbes*, etc.). The child chooses this item, it expresses their fantasy, and the caregiver must cooperate. At the same time, it also is a piece of reality; it is not a pure fantasy or an imaginary object.

Play, in this case, allows both adjustment to reality, but also creativity that treats the world as something that can be played with. Winnicott's version of psychic health is not one of adjustment to reality as given. One of his examples was from when he worked with children who had been evacuated from London and other urban centres during World War 2 to escape the bombing. These children would arrive at transit centres before being placed with new foster families. For Winnicott the children who worried him were the ones who sat and behaved. He thought they had given-up on the possibility of engaging with the world. It was the children who acted-out, who broke things, who tested boundaries, who were healthy. This premature adjustment to reality Winnicott called the 'false self'.

My point might be obvious already. The state, in the form I have described, functions as a bad-enough caregiver. The state does not provide a holding environment, even the problematic one of social democracy. Instead, we are confronted with reality as unmediated, we are called to adjust and conform to a floating set of intrusive regulations and rules. While we are 'free' to act as we wish, we know that if we do not conform we will lose our livelihood, our capacity for social existence, and so 'disappear'. The state is both absent when needed and intrusive when not, as I have sketched. The result is the enforcement of the social regime of precarity and austerity. We have no time for play and are not expected to be creative, except in so far as that can be tied to value production.

This is startlingly evident in UK education. Children (and, in a different way teachers) are subject to constant testing and assessment for their 'progress'. The league tables that result from this assessment measure the 'success' of schools. This regime is imposed from the start. A battery of measurement and assessment enforce the adjustment of the child to reality. The child that does not adjust has little alternative. There is no 'outside' to this system, except in the sense of being 'excluded' from school, which denies the child any education, or the various forms of diagnosis of mental and physical disorders that can claim some exemption or moderation of this regime.

We can note the response to the absence and the intrusive presence of the state in the two main strategic responses we see on the left. The first response is to demand that the state become present again, in what we could call its social democratic form – providing public health care, free education, making utilities and other public goods public again, and restoring or providing benefits and pensions. This we could call the social democratic position. While this might seem reformist we can note, as Alberto Toscano has pointed out, that such reformist demands are revolutionary in the current conjuncture. The second response, what we could call the anarchist response, is to demand further withdrawal and withering away of the state. To try to struggle against the violent intrusive presence of the state and to carve out spaces in what has been left by the withdrawal of the state. As I've suggested, and I don't think this is necessarily a problem, we often witness a mix of these strategies: demands the state appear here (health care, education) and withdraw there (policing, border control).[9] This, it seems to me, is one way to cope with the bad-enough state in its current form.

I don't have a magic solution to this contradiction nor do I believe contradictions resolve themselves. Instead, I want to end by turning back to what Winnicott calls the 'holding environment'. I want to suggest that this notion might be a promising one for thinking (and acting) within the contradictory (dys)function of the bad-enough state. Holding environments would be places in which we could step-back from the intrusive demands of the state and its absence. They would offer the chance to 'play' with options and possibilities that are denied us. In a sense, the very existence of such environments might require the complex negotiation of demands to the state, to make spaces available and to sustain them, and demands for the withering of the state, to withdraw from such spaces to allow creativity and struggle. This is a modest proposal, and one that might simply reflect what is already happening. I think, however, grasping the malign forms of the bad-enough state might also help us shape such holding environments to attend the complex and shifting nature of our demands and needs. In this way, we might refuse the 'false selves' of conformity to capitalist and state demands to inhabit precarity as a way of life, and open the possibilities of 'true selves' that are not bound to mechanisms and forms of modulation and control. We might develop our own alternative sense of care and holding that can resist unbearable lightness of capitalist being.

1 The two leading contemporary thinkers of transition are, to my mind, Étienne Balibar and Alberto Toscano. Both dwell on the problem of transition and their works offer rich resources for the consideration of this problem. See, in particular, Alberto Toscano, 'Transition Deprogrammed', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 113.4 (2014): 761–775. https://read.dukeupress.edu/south-atlantic-quarterly/article/113/4/761/3699/Transition-Deprogrammed

2 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), pp.110–11.

3 The work of the late Mark Fisher has been one of the most powerful articulations of the 'hauntology' of social democracy across artistic and political forms. See *Ghosts of My Life* (Zero Books, 2014) and *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater, 2016).

4 Alessandro Russo, 'Did the Cultural Revolution End Communism?', in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Zizek (London and New York: Verso, 2010), pp.179–194, p.193.

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It goes without saying that political economy regards the *proletarian*, i.e. he who lives without capital and ground rent from labour alone, and from one-sided, abstract labour at that, as nothing more than a *worker*. It can therefore advance the thesis that, like a horse, he must receive enough to enable him to work. It does not consider him, during the time when he is not working, as a human being. It leaves this to criminal law, doctors, religion, statistical tables, politics and the beadle.

Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', in *Early Writings*, intro. Lucio Colletti, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992), p.288.

6 The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2014), p.12.

7 Gilles Deleuze, 'Nomad Thought', in *The New Nietzsche*, ed. David B. Allison (The MIT Press, 1986), pp.142 – 149, p.144.

8 For a feminist critique of Winnicott's work, see Denise Riley, *War in the Nursery* (London: Virago, 1983).

9 We could also add these strategies 'mix' in different ways across the different social identities that structure the capitalist social form. The older might tend to the social democratic to defend what they have, while the young, already in a more exposed position, might tend to the anarchist refusal. This is a schematic suggestion and we could multiply possibilities, such as the demand for mental health care services amongst the young, that I have noted, and the creation of alternative spaces by the older. These issues require careful understanding as they vector through gender, sexuality, 'race' and others modes of existence.

taken from here

Fotot: Bernhard Weber

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